THE LAUGHTER OF THE UNIVERSE
Easter Sunday
March 27, 2005

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Psalm 98
Jeremiah 31:1–6
Matthew 27:59–28:10

"Go, make it as secure as you can."
Matthew 27:65 (NRSV)

The proclamation of Easter Day is that all is well.
And as a Christian, I say this not with the easy optimism
of one who has never known a time when all was not well
but as one who has faced the Cross in all its obscenity as well as in all its glory,
who has known one way or another what it is like to live separated from God.
In the end, his will, not ours, is done. Love is the victor.
Death is not the end. The end is life. His life and our lives, through him, in him.
Existence has greater depths of beauty, mystery, and benediction
than the wildest visionary ever dared to dream.
Christ our Lord is risen.

Frederick Buechner
The Magnificent Dead

As his friends came to the tomb in the early morning,
so dear God, we come to hear that life is ever lord of death
and love will never lose its own.
We've heard it before but somehow it is new every Easter morning.
Startle us again with your truth, and speak your word to us this day.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Every year, during the week before Easter, the preachers across the land find themselves cascading back and forth between almost giddy anticipation of full-to-overflowing sanctuaries—the "Big One," my barber calls it as I settle back into the chair for my Easter haircut: "Are you ready for the big one?"—and wringing their hands in high anxiety that they will not be up to

the task. The rumor is that some of you may only come to church on Easter, and while we are deeply grateful that you are here, the utilitarian in us understands that we have only one shot and we want to make it count.

Our problem, of course, is that no matter how many years we have been doing this, the story never changes. The thought of 40 or more Easter sermons is, itself, astonishing.

And then, into the midst of our pre-Easter scurrying about for new material, the newspaper calls and the reporter says, “We’re taking a survey. What are you going to preach about Sunday morning?” An odd question, it always seems to me. As if there were much choice! I always consider momentarily —and then think better of—a flippant attempt at humor: “Oh, I thought I’d talk about Mother’s Day this year, or the Capital Funds campaign since you’re all here.” Or how about the Illini’s practice of resurrection in two great minutes of basketball last night?

Will Willimon, who recently left his post as Dean of Duke Chapel and Minister to the University in order to become a bishop in the Methodist Church, recalls being called by the student newspaper and the reporter who earnestly asked,

> “Dr. Willimon, what would you say is the goal of Easter?” The student must have been in the Business School.
>
> “The goal of Easter?” I asked.
>
> “Yes,” the reporter persisted, “what is its point, its purpose? Why do you do it?”
>
> “Well, we just do it. Easter is just, well it’s just Easter. We just celebrate it . . .”
>
> “I could see the headlines: Dean of Chapel says Easter is pointless.”

And then Willimon reflects, “From the utilitarian, pragmatic, serious perspective of modern people, much that we Christians do seems pointless. Even Easter. We do it for the sheer fun of it. That, modern people may one day discover, just may be the point after all” (*The Last Laugh,* pp. 1–16).

Jürgen Moltmann is a German theologian and a very serious thinker whose work over the past fifty years has been very important and who wrote one of the theological classics of our time, *The Crucified God.* Moltmann deals honestly and thoughtfully with the reality of tragedy on a global scale, does so out of his own experience as a seventeen-year-old conscript in the German army at the end of the Second World War, witnessing the fire-

bombing of his hometown of Hamburg, in which 40,000 civilians were killed, and also the personal scale as we deal with suffering and loss in our lives. “Good Friday is the center of the world,” Moltmann wrote recently. “But Easter morning is the Sunrise of the Coming of God and the morning of new life and it is the beginning of the future of the world.’” And then these provocative words: “The laughter of the universe is God’s delight. It is the universal Easter laughter in heaven and earth” (*Passion for God*).

For the sheer fun of it? Easter laughter? That isn’t how the story begins. It begins in darkness, despair, shattered hopes, piercing grief, human experience with which everyone of us is all too familiar.

In a *Newsweek* cover article, “How Jesus Became Christ: From Resurrection to the Rise of Christianity,” Jon Meacham writes a powerful introduction:

> The story, it seemed, was over. Convicted of sedition, condemned to death by crucifixion, nailed to a cross on a hill called Golgotha, Jesus of Nazareth had endured all that he could—approaching the end he repeated a verse of the 22nd Psalm, a phrase familiar to first-century Jewish ears: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” There was a final wordless cry. And then silence. (*Newsweek* 28 March 2005)

Meacham tells the story like the reporter/journalist that he is. He observes that Jesus’ followers had no answer to his anguished question of why God would forsake him and that they clearly expected an altogether different outcome. If he was the promised Messiah, his followers expected him to seize real power, military and political power, and achieve some kind of victory. There is reason to believe that Judas, particularly, wanted him to lead a military revolt against Rome. In any event, Jesus’ arrest and trial for sedition and his subsequent execution as a common criminal came as a crushing blow to his disciples, along with the fact that his own decisions and behavior seemed somehow to be part of the whole sad, tragic, disappointing fiasco. He could have avoided it all but for some reason chose not to, seemed intentionally to put his safety at risk, his life on the line. And so they fled, left him to die alone, and went into hiding.

The women alone among his followers stayed with him until the end and watched as he died and as he was buried and the tomb carefully sealed. And after the sabbath, it was the women who came back to the place of burial, for practical, pragmatic reasons: to ensure that the body was properly anointed. Their major concern was whether they could manage to remove the stone with which the tomb was sealed.

The accounts are wonderfully inconsistent about what happened next, about who was there, who arrived first, who said what to whom. The accounts are consistent about two things: the body was not in the tomb and nobody, nobody was expecting a resurrection. Everybody's immediate conclusion was that somebody, for whatever reason, had moved the body elsewhere. When they are told what happened, they respond as we would. They don't believe it; they are skeptical, doubting, and very frightened.

Satirist, TV producer, and author Tony Hendra has written a wonderful book, *Father Joe: The Man Who Saved My Soul*, which describes Hendra's lifelong relationship with a British Benedictine monk, Father Joe. When he was an adolescent, Hendra spent Easter in the monastery and remembers thinking, "Easter is a terrific story. It starts as tragedy; the hero broken and bloody, against all expectations, dead. But the curtain doesn't fall there. The next morning the tomb is empty, the body's gone. . . . Great stuff" (p. 271).

The detail in this familiar story that jumped out at me this year was that delegation of old men, distinguished religious leaders, chief priests and Pharisees, who come to the governor's office the day after the crucifixion. I know these people. They are good men basically, leaders in the community. They only want to preserve public order, the status quo. I don't expect Pontius Pilate was particularly glad to see them. They had already talked him into doing something he didn't seem to want to do, namely get involved in an internal debate in their own community. He had tried, unsuccessfully, to wash his hands of the whole matter. And here they were back again. The prisoner, Jesus of Nazareth, the would-be Messiah, was dead, as dead as Rome and Pilate could make him. What in the world could they want now?

"We're here, Excellency," they say, "because he did say something about rising from the dead, and while you and we know how utterly preposterous that is, his friends could steal the body under the cover of darkness and claim he rose again and then we would have another problem on our hands. So please, Excellency, station some soldiers at the tomb just to make sure there is no funny business."

Obviously irritated, Pilate points out that the leaders have a cordon of guards at the temple. "Use your own men," he says. "Go, make the tomb as secure as you can." That's the image I love here: elderly men with station and status and real gravitas, invested in the status quo, frightened, trying for all they are worth to make sure that nothing interrupts or changes the way things are, securing the tomb. Old men trying to keep the sun from rising, Frederick Buechner says (*The Magnificent Defeat*).

Frederick Buechner says they have two fears actually. The one they express is that someone will steal the body and claim resurrection, a religious hoax.

But, Buechner observes, religious hoaxes are relatively short-lived. Would-be Messiahs were a dime a dozen in those days. The real fear, the fear they had probably not even acknowledged, was that it might happen, that he might actually get up and walk out of the tomb. That, they rightly understood, was not only unthinkable; it would change everything. If Jesus of Nazareth was the Christ, God's anointed, God incarnate, and if somehow in him the power of death was defeated, we are living in a brand-new world. Thousands of preachers, Buechner says, on Easter Sunday act like those old men when they try to explain the resurrection, make it safe, secure. It was Jesus' teachings that live on, we sometimes say. Or his sweet spirit lived beyond him, or his resurrection really just points to the power of life we see every springtime—which unfortunately doesn't always arrive at Easter here in Chicago. None of that is very compelling. None of that is what faith claims this day. Jesus Christ is risen. Death could not hold him. He and what he stood for were not defeated as everybody thought. Death is defeated—and we are living in a new world.

That is the issue, and it is far more profound than biological, physiological details of resuscitation. Tony Hendra, not a theologian at all, got it right about Easter: "What if this singular man in some unprecedented, unrepeatable way was in touch with the divine, was divine as claimed. What if the story of the Resurrection was actually, factually true, not just an extra crowd-pleasing narrative twist but a once-in-the-planet's-lifetime occurrence designed to demonstrate that there was hope after death. Then the world and the universe would be totally different places" (pp. 72–73).

That is the issue. That is the truth we search for words to proclaim this day. The world is a different place because Jesus Christ rose from the dead. How? Well, at the very heart of the matter, Easter points to God, the transcendent power beyond all power, the ruler of the universe, the One who is not limited by, constrained by, our reason, our common sense, cause-and-effect, scientific method manner of thinking, a God who can make a way where there is no way, a God for whom impossibilities became infinite possibilities.

In her new book *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*, Anne Lamott, an irreverent but devout recent convert to Christianity and a Presbyterian, talks candidly about her own experience as a recovering alcoholic and single mother whose life was literally saved by her encounter with Jesus Christ through a small Presbyterian congregation in Marin City, California. Out of her own experience she writes, "When God is going to do something wonderful, He or She always starts with a hardship. When God is going to do something amazing, He or She starts with an impossibility."

And Easter eloquently affirms that God cares about this world and our life in the world, our bodies as well as our souls and spirits. God cares about

human beings, human bodily existence, human hunger and pleasure, human suffering and joy. Presbyterian theologian Cynthia Rigby says, “Easter invites us to celebrate the beauty of creaturely existence and to care deeply about the healing of the world” (*Outlook*, Easter 2005).

And, perhaps most importantly, because it is so intimate, so very personal for every one of us, Easter means that the cross—and the suffering and death associated with it—are not the end of the story. Knowing that death is not the end, we no longer have to live in fear, in dread, under the power of death.

Reflecting on the Easter and the Passion that proceeds it, Anne Lamott wrote, and many of us totally understand, “I don’t have the right personality for Good Friday, for the crucifixion. I’d like to skip ahead to the resurrection. In fact, I’d like to skip ahead to the resurrection vision of one of the kids in our Sunday School who drew a picture of the Easter Bunny outside the open tomb; everlasting life and a basket full of chocolates. Now you’re talking” (p. 160).

The problem is we live in a Good Friday world, a world in which innocent people die of accidents and political miscalculations and at the hand of a classmate while sitting at their desks; a world in which a young woman dies as the world watches in sympathy and pain and as her husband and parents and the state legislature, courts, Congress, and the President become involved; a world in which we all, sooner or later, experience pain and loss and death. “I don’t have the right personality for the human condition,” Anne Lamott writes. “But,” she says, “I believe in the resurrection, in Jesus’ resurrection and in ours.”

When a good friend was sick and dying, Lamott invited her along to a lecture series she was delivering in Park City, Utah. It was the week after Easter. Anne Lamott wrote, “She ought to have one more Easter. Easter is so profound.” So the two friends recreated Holy Week, a week later. On Thursday they had communion, using Coca Cola for wine and Pepperidge Farm Goldfish for the bread broken in remembrance of him. They washed each other’s feet.

They celebrated Good Friday, “a sad day of loss and cruelty when all you have to go on is faith that light shines in the darkness and nothing, not death, not disease, not even the government, can overcome it.”

She writes for all of us, “I hate it that you can’t prove the beliefs of my faith. If I were God, I’d have the answers at the end of the workbook, so you could check as you went along, to see if you’re on the right track. But noooo—Darkness is our context, Easter’s context; without it you couldn’t see the light. Hope is not about proving anything. It’s about choosing to believe this

one thing, that love is bigger than any grim, bleak [stuff] anyone can throw at us" (p. 274).

Easter morning dawned with a brilliant sun and bright blue sky and they celebrated the resurrection by baking apricot scones, which seems somehow just right.

And so we celebrate the resurrection in the ways most precious to us: we crowd into churches today to be part of worship because this truth is so big and so important not one of us is up to understanding it, let alone describing it, by ourselves; we celebrate with our great hymns because we can always sing more than we can say and with flowers, eloquent bearers of creation's beauty and God's rejoicing with us in the fundamental goodness of the world. We gather with family and dear friends to celebrate the goodness of life, our lives, and God's gracious, unending presence with us whatever challenges we may be facing.

And all day long we will listen for, and perhaps hear, the laughter of God, "the Easter laughter of the universe."

We live in a Good Friday world that becomes, because of this day, an altogether different place.

Every year it seems we are reminded, at about this time, of human frailty and mortality and the reality and finality of death.

Someone I know sat by the bedside of her elderly father two weeks ago during the last twenty-four hours of his life. She held his hand and patted him and told him she and all his family loved him. She held up pictures of his grandchildren and great grandchildren. She told him God loved him and was with him and that there was nothing to fear. She recited all the Bible verses she could remember, the 23rd Psalm. Finally, when she could think of nothing more to say, she said, "Easter is coming, Daddy. Easter is coming." And the hymn that came to mind and the hymn she softly sang to him was this morning's strongest hymn, a hymn in which I do believe, if you listen closely enough, you will hear the joyful laughter of God, the laughter of the universe,

> Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!
> Our triumphant holy day, Alleluia!

And so, dear friends,

> Do not be afraid of the future.
> Do not be afraid of what tomorrow may bring, whatever it is.
> Do not be afraid of death.

Jesus Christ is risen.

Thanks be to God.